

# The Two Other Big Joe Williams

By Bob Groom



**W**ith the excellent two part feature on Big Joe Williams by D. Thomas Moon in B&R 346 and 347 I was reminded of all the confusion over the various artists who bore that name, the most obvious being that with the Joe Williams who sang with the Count Basie band and had hits with 'Every Day I Have The Blues' and 'Well, All Right, O.K., You Win'. Less alert jazz critics sometimes got them confused!

When I interviewed Big Joe in the 1960s I asked him about the two Joe Williams who had recorded for Vocalion pre-war but skirted round the contentious (and wrong) identification of Joe with King Solomon Hill on Paramount, that was clearly some kind of misunderstanding.

Joe didn't tell tall stories like Sonny Boy Williamson (Rice Miller), Otis Spann or Jack Dupree or fantasize as Big Bill Broonzy did about Sleepy John Estes being a much older man, when he was actually a contemporary of Bill's, but sometimes there could be misunderstandings.

The artists who recorded for Vocalion as 'Joe Williams' were different and neither of them were Big Joe. The circa September 1929 recordings of 'Mr. Devil Blues' and 'I Want It Awful Bad' (Vocalion 1457) clearly have vocals by Joe McCoy, accompanied by Jed Davenport (harmonica).

The following February McCoy was the vocalist on 'Save Me Some' and 'You Ought To Move Out Of Town' during a session for Vocalion with Davenport's Beale Street Jug Band. Most probably McCoy needed a pseudonym for his first solo record as he had been recording for Columbia with Memphis Minnie.

Williams was an everyday enough name as to not alert his record company to his extra-contractual activity. Unfortunately the correct identification is not given in 'Blues And Gospel Records 4' which wrongly attributes the 1929 vocals to a Tennessee artist who recorded for Bluebird in 1941. This Joe Williams was an associate of Yank Rachell and John Estes and was thought to hail from Jackson, Tennessee, the hometown of Sonny Boy No. 1. (A note to the Big Joe entry does, however, suggest that the McCoy identification was a possibility.)

An originally unissued session for Vocalion in November, 1938 (now available on Document CDs) featured vocalist Mattie Hardy but for some reason was credited to Joe Williams with his Chicago Swingers. This might be a different artist again (and it certainly isn't Big Joe) but it could just be Joe McCoy again using the Joe Williams nom-de-disc as by now he was recording for Decca. The band's sound is somewhat reminiscent of that of the Harlem Hamfats, a very popular recording group that included both Joe and his brother Charlie McCoy.

As far as we can be sure Big Joe Williams' first solo recordings were for Bluebird in February, 1935 and I have always felt they have been under-rated. Recording with a six-string guitar at this point, Joe sings and plays with great power and conviction and in terms of dynamics approaches the impact of a Patton or Robert Johnson. The late Bernard Holland was a great booster of Joe's prowess and felt that he was unfairly overshadowed by his contemporaries in critical acclaim, a view with which I can but agree.

When Joe had his second Bluebird session in Chicago in October, 1935 another fine Mississippi artist made his only four sides in the same recording studio. I asked Joe what he knew about Otto Virgil but he was surprisingly non-committal, simply indicating that he was from Joe's home area but played in the Delta.

Virgil's 'Bad Notion Blues' is lyrically loosely based on Charlie Patton's 'Love My Stuff' although quite different instrumentally, and this would seem to confirm his Delta affiliation. 'Little Girl In Rome' indicates that he had a girlfriend there while 'Got The Blues About Rome', which utilises verses from Blind Lemon Jefferson recordings (including the title verse of 'Matchbox Blues') includes the line 'I've got the blues about Rome, but Rome is not my home'. The small town of Rome is on Highway 49 West in Sunflower County in the Delta.

Otto Virgil was in fact born in Columbus, the county seat of Lowndes County in East Mississippi on 20th October 1905 and later lived in East St. Louis, Illinois, possibly dying there circa 1959. Although born in Oktibbeha County to the west, Big Joe Williams grew up in Crawford, also in Lowndes County, and occasionally returned there to see his mother during his endless ramblings. There seems little doubt that Virgil and Joe were one and the same man. The latter name being a record company mis-spelling. Joe was therefore almost certainly responsible for Otto's one appearance on record. In later years he acted as a part-time talent scout for several record labels.

It seems an odd coincidence that Otto should sing about a town named Rome and seemingly be named after the great Roman poet Virgil, author of the Aeneid! Perhaps it was originally a slave name.

**Acknowledgements:** Thanks to Chris Smith for sight of Virgil's draft card, completed 16th October 1940 in East St. Louis, which gives his birthplace/date and states that he was 5 feet 9 inches tall, 150 pounds and worked for the Skulling's Steel Company in St. Louis. His wife is given as Genita Virgil but a marriage license application seems to suggest that he remarried some years later to one Eva Geter. See also Page 112 of 'Blues: A Regional Experience' by Bob Eagle and Eric LeBlanc (Praeger, 2013). All four titles are available on 'Mississippi Blues Volume 4' (Document DOCD 5682).

